

THE MCSC GUIDE TO ENGAGING THE MEDIA

M I C H I G A N



**COMMUNITY
SERVICE**

COMMISSION

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WHAT THE MEDIA CAN DO FOR YOU

- Educate the community about your program
- Increase your credibility
- Build support among individuals, community leaders, potential funders, and taxpayers
- Allow your program to serve as a model to other programs and communities

WHY DOES THE MEDIA IGNORE SOME STORIES?

- Not deemed newsworthy at the moment
- Media releases are poorly written
- Information provided is too long or too complicated
- Information provided is not believable
- The story is not localized

WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY ... FROM THE MEDIA'S PERSPECTIVE

- The story appeals to emotions
- The readers will identify with the story
- The story has a very clear point
- The story has some sort of drama that is played out
- The story is about people not an organization
- The events actually happened
- The key players identified in the story (not just the contact person listed on the media release) are accessible
 - The key players are ready and willing to be interviewed
 - You need to make sure the key players back up your story and believe in your cause

TYPES OF MEDIA RELEASES

News releases

- “Hard” news
- Time sensitive
- Current events

Feature releases

- “Soft” news
- Human interest stories about volunteers or program activities

Editor’s advisory

- The purpose is to invite media to an event
- Contains only who, what, where, when, why
- Can be laid out like an invitation with the words who, what, where, when, why

Photo with caption

- Can be great fillers for newspapers to have on hand
- The photo tells a story
- Must be a quality photo

WRITING MEDIA RELEASES

The Format

- Your organization should create its own format and stick to it.
- Shorter is better. Try to keep it to one page.
- If you must go to the second page, do the following:
 - Type the word “More”, centered at the bottom of the first page
 - Put ID information at the top of the second page (organization, contact name, phone number, date)
- Put the date in the Release Line (when the release is available for print) OR in the Date Line. Not both. You should always strive to have your Release Line be “For Immediate Release.”
- Use line-and-a-half spacing and at least 10-point type (12-pt type is best).
- The contact information should always include name, phone, and email.
- At the end of the release put: ### or –30–. This means this is the end of the release.
- Background information can follow the end of the release to provide context. Keep it short.

The Structure

- Use the inverted pyramid structure.
 - Most compelling information is at the top.
 - Editors cut from the bottom.
- Use short sentences.
- Short paragraphs are best. One thought per paragraph.
- Put any quotes in separate paragraphs.

The Language

- Simple
- Avoid jargon (and we have a lot of it!)
- Use active instead of passive voice
- Don’t editorialize or exaggerate
- Spell out acronyms the first time
- Tell the story up front. Keep background information in the background.

WRITING MEDIA RELEASES (CONTINUED)

The Lead

The lead is the opening sentence or two. It must:

- Attract attention up front
- Appeal to your audience
- Pique their curiosity

Here is an example of a good lead and a not-so-good lead for the same story. This example came from the sample feature release at the end of this packet.

ORIGINAL LEAD (NOT-SO-GOOD)

The XYZ Mentoring program is establishing Peace Centers in the Anywhere Public Schools so students have a place to go to learn about alternatives to violence and ways to promote peace. They engage in peer mentoring program. Students and administrators alike believe this initiative is bringing about a decrease in violence in the schools.

LEAD REWRITTEN (GOOD LEAD)

Some gang members in Detroit are now working for peace, due to an innovative program XYZ Mentoring launched in Anywhere Public Schools one year ago.

Credibility

- Be honest and accurate
- Use specific dates, times, numbers
- Tie in known personalities and organizations when appropriate
- Drop in a few (accurate) statistics
- Point out the results

Learning From The Pros

- Read top quality newspapers (e.g. Wall Street Journal)
- Check out this website: www.grassrootsgroup.com/newsrelease.htm
- Great books:
 - Bulletproof News Releases, Kay Borden
 - Writing Effective News Releases, Catherine McIntyre

YOUR ORGANIZATION'S MEDIA POLICY

- A media policy is the procedures your organization follows when interacting with the media.
- Know your organization's media policy.
 - Develop a media policy of your own that fits within your organization's media policy.
- If you don't have a media policy, develop one.
- Make sure all staff members are aware of and familiar with the media policy

Ideas for developing media policies:

- All media releases must be approved by the executive director (or who?) prior to their release.
- Identify a specific staff person to be the media spokesperson. This person will respond to all media calls. This person must:
 - Be articulate and know your organization's message. S/he must also know the specifics of each media release that is distributed.
 - Be aware that nothing is "off the record" when talking with the media.
- Determine a back up person or process in case the designated spokesperson is not available.
- Determine whether the designated media spokesperson will also be the contact person on all media releases. Some organizations will have a different spokesperson handle calls relating to a specific media release because that person will have specific expertise about the release.
- The staff members that answer the phone when the media calls ask:
 1. The name of the media rep.
 2. The name of their media outlet (name of the newspaper, TV station, etc.)
 3. Contact information (phone and/or email),
 4. What kind of information they need.
 5. Whether they are on a deadline.
- Every staff member will keep a written log of all media contacts. (Develop a media contact sheet for staff members to use to record media contacts.)
- All media releases will follow the format established by the organization.
- Before media releases are written, verify that the contact person will be available when the media release is distributed.
- The staff media spokesperson must receive a copy of all media releases before they are distributed.
- Have a designated staff member maintain a media database.
- All information relating to the media will be kept in the media files.

BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MEDIA

Get to know a little media lingo

- Stop saying “press release.” Instead say use the generic term “media release” or be more specific and say “feature release,” “news release,” “editor’s advisory,” etc.
- Understand the difference between Public Service Announcements (PSA) and media releases.
 - Media releases are written.
 - PSAs are audio or visual tapes created for radio or television. They are usually aired with no cost to the organization, but there is usually a cost associated with creating them. They are usually 60, 30, or 15 seconds in length.

Build a relationship before you have a story to tell

- Become familiar with local newspapers, radio, TV.
 - What are they covering?
 - Who are their community and feature writers?
 - Why does your story fit in with today’s news?
- Make personal contact—call or email your media representatives.
 - Make the contact brief
 - Introduce yourself and explain your program
 - Ask what kinds of stories about your program interest them
 - Find out their deadlines
 - Find out how they like to receive information (fax, email, other)

MEDIA RELEASE DISTRIBUTION AND FOLLOW UP

- Send the release in the format preferred by each media outlet (e.g. fax, email, etc.)
- Don't pester the media after the release is sent.
- Make sure the person who answers the phone is:
 - Aware that a media release has been sent.
 - Knows who is the contact person for the release.
 - Has a copy of the release.
- Make sure the contact person and other key players identified in the release are available and prepared to talk with the media.
- Be aware that feature releases may be held for quite a while before they are used, as they are not time sensitive.
- If media do call, respond ASAP.
- If you can't get the information they need right away, let them know. Also, let them know when (or if) you will be able to respond with the information they need.
- If the media does cover your story, send a quick thank you.
- If inaccuracies are printed or aired, correct them right away.
 - A friendly phone call or email to the writer/reporter is the best way to correct inaccuracies.

MEDIA DOS AND DON'TS

- Do learn how to help them do their job.
 - Let them know when your story ties with what's going on in the community.
 - Help them tie your story to national news.
- Do be available for the stories they want to cover, as well as your own.
- Do approach them when you have interesting, relevant stories to tell.
- Do offer exclusives whenever possible.
 - You don't have to send your story to all of the media in town.
 - Talk with a specific media outlet to see if they are interested in your story as an exclusive.
- Don't complain about the media publicly or privately.
- Don't call the media when they are on deadline.
- Don't bombard them with stories.
 - Send a good story once every 3-6 months.